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Made-in-Afghanistan reasons for Canada's military to stay the course

Kabul, Afghanistan – Kabul, Afghanistan – The critical question asked by visitors to the International Security Assistance Force headquarters here is simple: Are we winning the battle against the insurgents in Afghanistan?

Almost any Canadian soldier, diplomat or NATO official asked that question invariably answers: Yes, we are, but there is still a long way to go.

But, they are also aware that NATO has a huge strategic challenge on its hands: effectively communicating that message to member countries like Canada in a manner that Canadians understand their 74 war dead and hundreds wounded since the ISAF mission began in 2002 hasn't been for naught.

With Canada as but one example, the problem NATO planners in Belgium have identified is that most Canadians view Afghanistan through a Canadian-centric news straw which invariably emphasizes the death of each Canadian soldier.

The recent death of Gunner Jonathan Dion underscores that point.

NATO's strategists also stress that perception is a NATO-wide concern, because it is thought each member nation views its Afghanistan mission through its own nationalistic lens.

In the words of Mark Laity, Brussels-based Chief of Strategic Communications for NATO's Supreme Headquarters Allied Power Europe: "I'm pretty sure there are 37 nations who think they are fighting this on their own."

"If you ask Canadians what Operation Medusa was, they will say it was a Canadian Victory."

Operation Medusa was widely reported as a Canadian led-mission in which hundreds of Canadian soldiers backed by coalition troops and Afghan soldiers launched a major offensive against the Taliban in the Zhari, Panjwai and Pashmul districts west of Kandahar in September 2006.

Some 200 Taliban were killed.

Laity said it was a little known fact that, with 300 soldiers contributing, Afghan soldiers outnumbered their Canadian, Danish, Dutch and British counterparts.

NATO's Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer explained in a briefing in Brussels that the importance of the Afghan army to the country's future has to be emphasized both within Afghanistan and to NATO member nations.

"Part of our exit strategy is training and equipping the Afghan national army."

A second point to emphasize, de Hoop Scheffer said, is that developing Afghanistan to the point that it doesn't again fall prey to the Taliban will take generations.

"It doesn't mean that our military will take generations, but giving up on Afghanistan, it will be a black hole. Kosovo is very much on our minds, but the priority is Afghanistan."

On the ground in Kandahar, Afghanistan, Canadian Brig.-Gen. Guy Laroche, commander of Task Force Afghanistan, explains the war against the insurgents is definitely being won.

About a week before Christmas, Canadian and British troops backed by NATO air power supported the Afghan army in Operation Tereh Toora against insurgent pockets in the Zhari District in southern Afghanistan.

The importance of that mission, which killed 40 insurgents, was two-fold, Laroche explained.

The first was that the NATO and Afghan troops have the initiative and decide where and when they want to go.

The second key point, Laroche said, was that: "We (NATO) are not here to fight the Taliban, the only ones who can defeat the Taliban are the Afghans."

As for the critics who have doubts whether Canada's sacrifices in Afghanistan are worth it, they need to meet Afghans like Dr. Mohammad Haider Reza, the Kabul-based Program director for the United Nations Mine Action Centre for Afghanistan.

Under him, 8,500 Afghans – working in 165 de-mining teams – risk their lives daily to help make the Afghanistan countryside livable.

As a surgeon, Dr. Reza survived the Russian occupation; the mujahedeen resistance; the Taliban and al-Qaeda; the devastating post-9/11 U.S. air strikes and invasion; and now the NATO mission.

"There were nights with my wife and six kids, I didn't know if we were going to wake up in one piece. It's true that we now have these pockets of resistance, but if we compare today with 10 years ago, I'm very positive for a brighter future.

"Whether it is the British, the Dutch, the Canadians or the Americans, they are very helpful, but being the recipient of aid packages, there is no dignity and pride in that.

"The idea that Afghanistan is the highest producer of opium; it is a sad problem our farmers are faced with.

"But, we have to take responsibility to get our people out of this crisis. We are ready to sacrifice ourselves. It is important that we do not disappoint you, the international community."

The recent assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan changes none of that. That Pakistan's nuclear weapons might fall into the hands of insurgents has always been a concern, as have the insurgent safe havens in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas adjacent to Afghanistan.

If anything the increased volatility in Pakistan underscores the need for greater security in Afghanistan, not less.

Parliamentarians would do well to remember that when they debate in the New Year whether or not Canada should remain in Afghanistan past February 2009.

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